

# Current Affairs in the Middle East, a View from Tokyo

By Sato Kikuo

Great progress is being made towards peace between Israel and the Arab world in the Middle East and Japan's attitude towards this process is, understandably, best illustrated by the stance held in Tokyo.

Regarding Israel, two directly opposing viewpoints exist: One is the opinion that Jews are a gifted race, throughout history the world's greatest musicians and artists were Jewish and Jewish scientists have won countless Nobel Prizes. On the opposite end of the spectrum is a view akin to the money hungry, cruel character portrayed in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. This Western distaste for the Jewish people is deeply rooted in certain spheres of Japanese society. Additionally, those who unequivocally subscribe to the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*—written for strategic reasons by Imperial Russia's secret police—occasionally surface in the Japanese media and elsewhere.

This past spring, one of Japan's leading publishing companies, the Bungei Shunju, published an article in its monthly magazine *Marco Polo* claiming that the gas chambers at Auschwitz concentration camp did not exist. Quite alarming and in bad taste, the article was based on the writer's secondhand knowledge of this opposing view held by a few Western scholars. There was fierce public criticism of the author, editor and publisher resulting in the pulling of the article, publication of the magazine was discontinued, and an official visit was made to the Israeli embassy to offer apologies. By no means, however, does this indicate the disappearance of anti-Jewish sentiment among certain Japanese intellectuals.

However, bolstered by the historic opportunity for peace between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the previously distant relationship between Israel and Japan has begun to improve over the past few years. Prime Minister Yitzhak

Rabin's visit to Japan last spring helped to impress upon Japan Israel's wish for peace on all levels.

How do Japanese people perceive Arabs? Unfortunately the overall impression is that Arabs are an enigma. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs delineates the 22 countries from Morocco in the west to Afghanistan as the Middle East. Thus, since every country—with the exception of Israel, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey—is in the Arab Empire, it is not surprising that most Japanese people consider the Middle East completely Arab. And, despite differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, the foremost religion being Islam, the Middle East is perceived as being both Arab and Muslim.

Another impression lodged in the Japanese psyche is the Middle East as the world's largest storehouse of oil. For Japan, which depends largely on imported food and energy resources, establishing cooperative relations with oil-producing Middle Eastern states has been the mainstay of Japanese Middle East policy since the end of World War II. In connection with the Fourth Middle Eastern War in autumn 1973, the initial Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries-controlled oil "shock" reaffirmed the dire importance of this policy. Until that time, even representatives of the Saudi Arabian royal family were not given a warm reception in Japan and usually returned from official visits with a sense of failure.

However, the Japanese government's attitude changed after the first oil "shock" and, although effective measures to reduce energy consumption were a contributing factor, the Japanese government's new policy of both material and moral respect for Arab countries was the key reason why Japan survived the two oil crises.

Although there are diplomats and scholars who consider Israel the only democracy in the Middle East and acknowledge the country's advanced sci-

entific technology and culture, this affinity and deep respect do not relieve difficulties in policy formulation. The current trade boycotts against Israel by some Arab nations are a formidable handicap for Japanese policy makers and pose a constant obstacle to solidarity with Israel.

So goes a rundown of the principal attitudes of Japanese people regarding Israel and the Arab nations. Currently, there is no significant indication of a bias in either direction.

Since the end of the Cold War, the changes in the Middle East mirror the changes which have taken place around the world. Moves toward peace between Israel and Arab states began in earnest at the Madrid International Conference in 1991 (chaired mutually by the U. S. and Russia). Within the past two years, the lifting of the Arab boycott spurred a sudden increase of Japanese exports of industrial goods to Israel; Israeli exports of diamonds to Japan are also strong, with 60% of the Japanese market share coming from Israel. Current events are quickly shrinking the distance between Japan and the Middle East.

On relations with the Arab nations, there was an episode which revealed exactly how important this relationship is to Japan. Although unable to send Self-Defense Force troops to participate in the Gulf War, Japan contributed a total of \$13 billion to the multinational force (in reality the U.S. military). These funds were collected through an increase on a domestic tax and Japanese citizens could not hide their anger when the donation received no thanks from Kuwait and hardly any applause from the international community.

However, due to the strength of the United States' high-tech attack, Iraq was defeated and Kuwait was rescued. Saudi Arabia was also left practically unscathed. Nothing incited an increase in oil prices, and once again, Japan was able to secure imports from the Middle East despite the conflict. In this respect,



the \$13 billion donation was a small price to pay for the protection of needed oil supplies. However, the majority of Japanese citizens does not view the donation in this light.

The fundamental Palestinian peace agreement which generated the handshake between PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat and Prime Minister Rabin in Washington in 1993 acknowledged the autonomy of Jericho and the Gaza Strip, with autonomy gradually being expanded to encompass the area west of the Jordan River. Additionally, both leaders agreed to negotiate the final status of Palestine. As of July, removal of Israeli troops from the western gulf and implementation of elections for positions on the autonomous council are way behind schedule. Both sides are far apart on many questions and are holding ardent negotiations on security for Jewish settlers and the possibility of reintroducing Israeli troops into the area in an emergency.

Effective mediation by the Clinton administration reinstated the Syrian council discussion between Syria and Israel at the end of June. The return of the Golan Heights by Israel and peace on all fronts make up the framework of negotiations, while concrete measures include talks on where to draw borders, the width of a demilitarized trans-border, and the implementation of mutual surveillance as an early warning system for peace. It appears that the Syrian side was ready to compromise and a fair amount of progress was made.

Based on various obstacles faced by those negotiating for peaceful coexistence—terrorist attacks against Israelis by Gaza-based fundamentalist Hamas militants and the closing of Israeli checkpoints, taken as a countermeasure but causing Palestinian day workers to lose their source of income—media reports in



On the grounds of the American White House, the historic handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and PLO representative Arafat in September 1993 signal the start of a new era for the Middle East.

Photo: Kyodo News Service

Japan predict rocky negotiations.

## The road yet traveled

Along with a commentator on international affairs, I visited Jerusalem for a short period at the beginning of June and we were able to meet with executives of Israel's foreign affairs ministry. During this trip, we hoped to experience firsthand the prospects for the Palestinian peace process and the Syrian peace negotiations.

Our visit coincided with Israel's most comfortable season, and although temperatures reached 30°C, the breeze from the heights was wonderfully refreshing. While we were in Israel, United States Secretary of State Warren Christopher was making a historical visit to Jerusalem, Cairo and Damascus. During his hectic trip, he convinced Prime Minister Rabin to join him on a visit to Cairo for a meeting with President Hosni Mubarak and held talks with President Hafiz al-Assad in Damascus.

Israel's newspapers described his mission as an attempt to reopen the dying Syrian front. In the June 12 issue of the *Jerusalem Post*, a statement attributed to Chairman Arafat read, "Christopher came to tell the press that the train to Syria is ready to depart and before missing the train you better make your last concession at negotiations." The foremost Hebrew language newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* pointed out that "Syria can no longer opt for war. Under the current circumstances, Assad is at a

greater disadvantage than we are. Keeping [positive trends in Iran and Iraq] in mind, Syria should calculate the benefits of a peaceful resolution to current disputes," in its June 8 edition.

The concept of Syria at a great disadvantage was impressed upon us by the Foreign Ministry's Director of Information Division, Yigal Caspi, at our June 8 meeting. Caspi concluded that "No Soviet Union, No Money, No Weapons" has isolated Assad and forced him into a corner. Assad is at a disadvantage because his efforts to win peace on equal terms with Israel, a point on which he has continued to insist, have become veritably impossible to achieve. The symptoms are already evident. When Syria is obliged to make concessions to Israel under provisions in the security agreement, Assad will be hard pressed to convince his people to go along with the agreement.

Assad is a member of the 'Alawites, a minority ethnic group occupying the mountain areas near the Mediterranean Sea. After conciliating the majority Sunni group (the wealthy and distinguished merchant class), Assad has maintained a dictatorial system for the last 25 years based on military might. Like Iraq's President Saddam Hussein, Assad's power base is the Arab Ba'ath (Renaissance) Socialist Party. Since the two leaders compete for supremacy in the Arab world, Syria joined the multinational force during the Gulf War thereby assuming a cooperative posture towards the United States. By this action, Assad hoped to shed Syria's reputation as a country which supports terrorism. It is therefore probable that Syria would receive economic aid from the United States if it were to achieve a peace accord with Israel.

In the negotiations, Israel places great priority on a security accord in exchange for returning the Golan Heights. However, Caspi insisted that procurement of water resources is as much a priority. He showed us a detailed map of the area from the Sea of Galilee to the Golan Heights, both in the northern part of Israel. He provided us with a summary of the divided water resources throughout the country. According to his



explanation, the subterranean water which originates north of Golan at Mt. Hermon (which houses an Israeli military observation post) flows from the Heights through the Yarmouk River and down to Israel's Sea of Galilee. The water is pumped to the Jordan River from the sea's water storage facilities after which it eventually reaches the Dead Sea in the south. The chief emphasized that the waterway is Israel's lifeline and thus its security is imperative. We interpreted his statement to imply that any accords between Syria and Israel must include clauses which prevent Syria from arbitrarily extracting water from the Sea of Galilee, or in the worst case scenario, poisoning the water source.

Another difficult question we wanted to ask Caspi concerned the issue surrounding the Israeli capital. Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in the Third Middle Eastern war in 1967, and in 1981 the laws of West Jerusalem were applied to the East (internationally this was considered the point which marks the annexation of East Jerusalem) as well.

Since this time, the Israeli government claims that East/West Jerusalem is the united capital of Israel. In this manner Israel stubbornly refuses the Arab/Palestine assertion that East Jerusalem would be the capital of an independent Palestine.

East Jerusalem is an ancient city full of history. Three religions consider East Jerusalem's core their holy ground. The synagogue for the Jewish religion; Church of the Holy Sepulcher for the Christians; and one of Islam's foremost mosques, the Al-Aksa, and the adjacent Dome of the Rock where according to myth Mohammed mounted a heavenly horse, ascended into heaven and came face to face with Allah, are all located here. Immediately under the dome are ruins of Solomon's temple. The still-standing Western Wall is cherished by Jewish believers who touch their lips to this "Wailing Wall" and offer prayers to their god.

The resolution to divide Palestine into two parts, Arab and Israel, was made at a 1947 meeting of the United Nations.

At this time, Jerusalem was designated an international city. I mentioned this resolution and asked whether Israel's current control of the city was legal under this accord. Echoing official "East/West Jerusalem is the capital of Israel" opinion, Caspi's response was "That resolution is dead."

We were also able to meet with Jerusalem Mayor Amos Radian. Regarding the capital issue, he answered, "Since King David established the Kingdom of Israel in B.C. 1000, Jerusalem was occupied by various entities including Babylonian, Persian, the Roman Empire, Christian crusaders, Moslems, Ottoman Turks, and Britain, but only Israel made Jerusalem her capital." Mr. Radian clearly opposed the Arab desire to make East Jerusalem the capital of Palestine.

Since Jerusalem is in a politically sensitive position, many foreign countries have their embassies in Tel Aviv. Incidentally, however, U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole submitted a highly controversial bill which would transfer the American embassy to Jerusalem in four years. Many underlying conflicts may surface when peace negotiations enter their final stage and the position of Palestine is finally on the table.

Finally, there is one more focus which must not be forgotten when Japan forms Middle East policy: Iran. Japan continues to seek to build a large-scale petrochemical plant, destroyed during the Iran/Iraq War of the 1980s, and a dam with official development assistance funds. This effort is aimed at supporting the Rafsanjani government's drive for modernization to achieve a moderate Islamic republic.

However, the United States has incited international debate by its advocating of an economic embargo against Iran. The United States considers Iran a terrorist-supporting country and suspects Iran is secretly developing a nuclear weapons program.

Japan's view on this matter differs from the U.S. and that of the European Union and the entire issue remains up in the air. Japan bowed to U.S. pressure, froze the second phase of loans allocated for the dam and is currently waiting

for a resolution. The Foreign Ministry considers that a policy which supports the Rafsanjani regime will promote Iran's modernization, help relieve Middle East tension, and encourage stabilization. Japanese officials believe the tough U.S. policy of economic sanctions threatens the Rafsanjani regime, thereby fanning the flames of anti-Western sentiment in fundamentalist groups, and will eventually force Iran into a more extreme posture, achieving the opposite of what they intended.

A factor which complicates the current state of affairs is Russian President Boris Yeltsin's adamant advocacy of supplying water reactors to Iran and his refusal to heed opposition from the United States. For Russia, this type of technological assistance provides an opportunity to get a foothold in the Middle East, as well as relieve concern over Russia's insufficient energy supply. These actions also provide a picture of Russian policy toward the Middle East that is one of opposition to the U.S.-sponsored Middle East peace process. The whole issue clearly has international ramifications.

According to the above analysis, the thrust of Japan's policy in the Middle East is to achieve security for oil resources. To reach this objective, continued efforts towards peaceful coexistence for Israel and the Arab states is essential. Also, though it is necessary for Arab states to control the destructive activities of extremist groups and ultimately choose peace, the current flow of events make prospects grim for such progress.

On the other hand, we hope the Rabin administration has been able to overcome opposition from right-wing politicians and we hope for continued efforts towards the realization of peace which will then found this region's first era of security and growth. As we continue to long for this new era of historical coexistence, we hope both the government and people of Japan will never spare their support and cooperation. ■

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